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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 004277

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E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: JO PGOV KDEM
SUBJECT: PARLIAMENTARY ELECTIONS IN JORDAN: A PRIMER

REF: AMMAN 2985

¶11. (U) Summary. Preparations are well underway for November 20 elections in Jordan, in which voters will select members of the lower house (Chamber of Deputies). These elections are the second to take place under a reformed election law from 2001. 110 seats are at stake, among them six seats set aside for women, nine seats for Christians, three seats for Circassians or Chechens, and nine seats for bedouins. The election law prescribes a set calendar during which citizens declare their candidacy, the Interior Ministry approves those candidates, and campaigning begins. The Ministry has already identified violations of the election law, and is promising to prosecute those who undertake further infractions. While the Interior Ministry and candidates themselves are charged with monitoring the elections, the ability of civil society organizations to do so remains unclear. End Summary.

The Elections

¶12. (U) Elections for the 110 seats in Jordan's lower house are scheduled to take place on November 20. According to public statements of Interior Minister Id al-Fayiz, 3.4 million people (57% of Jordan's population) are eligible to vote. Of those 3.4 eligible voters, 2.5 million (73% of those eligible) have obtained voter registration cards. The large disparity between eligible voters and those with registration cards is due to non-voting (for parliamentary elections) members of the military, security services, and expatriate Jordanians.

¶13. (U) These polls are the second to take place under the 2001 amendments to the election law. That law lowered the voting age from nineteen to eighteen, merged voter registration into the national ID card, brought the judiciary into the process of counting and verification, increased the number of seats in Parliament, and increased the number of

constituencies from which members are elected.

Division of Seats

¶4. (U) Before the last elections in 2003, a quota was set by law for women in the lower house. This quota was set at six seats which are set aside for women candidates only. There is no separate ballot for women, and no upper limit to the number of women candidates who can be elected. The quota is filled on a national basis by the female candidates who obtain the top percentage of votes in their districts, but who do not win their districts outright. Women candidates who are the top overall vote getters in their districts win their seats in the normal way - the quota is not applied to them. While the law stipulates six seats reserved for women, theoretically the entire parliament could be composed of women if women candidates win outright - or earn the most votes of all candidates - in all of the districts.

¶5. (U) The quotas for Christians (nine seats) and Circassians/Chechens (three seats) are more straightforward. These seats are assigned based on census data to the districts where Christians, Circassians, and Chechens live. The top vote getters from each of these groups in each district wins the allotted seat.

¶6. (U) Nine seats in Jordan's parliament are set aside for bedouins. There are three separate, specially delineated electoral districts in Jordan that are designed specifically to fill these bedouin seats - one in the north of the country, one in the middle, and one in the south. Each district is allotted three seats.

¶7. (SBU) Looking at how the non-quota seats are divided, there is quite a bit of rural/urban inequity in Jordan's electoral system. Going by 2004 census data, the distribution of seats heavily discounts the votes from Amman.

While the Amman governorate is home to 38% of Jordan's population, it is only represented by 24% of the seats. Similarly, Zarqa claims 15% of Jordan's population, but only 11% of the seats. The mountain town of Karak, on the other hand, has just 4% of Jordan's population, but 11% of its parliamentary seats. If seats in parliament were truly representative, Amman would gain thirteen seats and Zarqa would gain four, while Karak would lose up to seven seats.

Candidate Lists and the Campaign Period

¶8. (U) While many potential candidates have been unofficially running their campaigns, the official period of candidate registration will occur between October 21 and October 24. All candidates pay a non-refundable 500 dinar (USD 700) fee. There is then a period where the eligibility of candidates can be challenged in court. This period will last from the end of candidate registration (October 24) until one week before the election (November 12). Until November 12, the candidacy of those running is officially considered to be "under review". Campaigning is allowed once a person's candidacy papers are filed. However, if a candidate is challenged in court, they are not allowed to campaign until the court rules on whether or not they are allowed to run.

¶9. (U) In a public statement on October 1, Interior Minister al-Fayez reminded all candidates that those who campaign outside of the official period will be prosecuted according to the elections law. The penalties in that law carry fines and/or jail time - up to five years hard labor. The Minister noted that "some candidates have started to put up signs - a clear violation of the law". He also commented on vote-buying and tribal endorsements, encouraging citizens "not to keep silent" on either. On the subject of tribal endorsements, al-Fayiz stated that the Interior Ministry "is examining the issue" and will "take measures" if necessary. On October 5, the Ministry asked newspapers to stop publishing campaign ads or pseudo-campaign ads in an effort

to create a level playing field for all.

¶10. (U) During the official campaign period (October 21 - November 19), the candidates are free to make speeches, post election propaganda, and go door-to-door. There are restrictions on where campaign events can be held, however. Campaigning cannot take place in universities or schools of any kind, places of worship, "public streets", and government buildings.

Monitoring

¶11. (U) The High Committee for Elections is responsible for the preparation and execution of the election law. The committee is chaired by the Minister of the Interior, and is also comprised of the Chief Justice of the Court of Cassation, along with a series of Interior Ministry officials: the Director of the Civil Status Department, the Secretary General, the Director of the Passport Department

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(who prepares voter rolls) and the Director of the Electoral Department. This national electoral commission is paralleled by committees in each of the twelve governorates, which are chaired by the governor and comprised of district court chiefs along with provincial officials. All in all, there will be over 35,000 workers manning the polls on election day. In an effort to educate Jordanians about how the electoral process works, the Interior Ministry has reportedly prepared an "election guide" that it will distribute via the governorates.

¶12. (SBU) While the Ministry of the Interior and the GOJ have issued conflicting statements regarding elections observation by Jordanian NGOs, the Prime Minister announced on October 19 that the National Center for Human Rights (NCHR) will be able to "follow" the voting and vote count on election-day. Prior to the PM's announcement, the GOJ floated the idea of having Jordanian NGOs "supervise" or "follow-up" on the elections, and at least four Jordanian NGOs and NGO coalitions have expressed an interest in monitoring the elections. According to the constitution, candidates themselves (or their representatives) are explicitly authorized to monitor the elections, but there is no stipulation that clearly allows or prohibits non-candidates or organizations from monitoring elections. The PM's decision will allow 100 to 150 representatives of the NCHR and affiliated civil society groups to visit voting and vote-counting stations. The government has deliberately avoided using the terms "monitoring" or "observing" in favor of the phrase "following" the elections. NGOs are also considering overseeing the election process from outside of polling stations.

Timeline

¶13. (U) The following is a timeline of Jordan's electoral calendar:

August 6: Final voter lists approved, Ministry of Interior forms election committees.

October 21: Start of candidacy declaration period. Candidates submit their names to the Ministry of Interior. Campaigning begins for candidates whose eligibility is not challenged in court. Candidates are allowed to hold election rallies, post signs, and proclaim their platforms.

October 24: End of candidacy declaration period. October 24 - November 12: Courts hear any potential challenges to candidates.

November 12: Campaigning begins for candidates whose eligibility was challenged in court, but who survived the challenge.

November 19: Campaigning ends.

November 20: Election day. Polls open at 0700, and close at 11900. An extension of two hours may be added to the voting times if deemed necessary.

November 22: Interior Minister announces the official results of the election. Official results are published in the official gazette.

The new parliament will likely require a royal decree to come into session, as the electoral law stipulates October 1 as the standard day on which to open a parliamentary session. This was also the route taken after the 2003 election, which occurred in July.

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